IN QUEST OF AUTHENTIC YUP'IK ART:

CONCEPTS OF TRADITION

By

Katrin A. Simon

RECOMMENDED:

Advisory Committee Chair

Chair, Department of Anthropology

APPROVED:

Dean, College of Liberal Arts

Dean of the Graduate School

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Katrin A. Simon, Diploma

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ABSTRACT

My interest is in the various perceptions – including my own - that people have of the concepts "traditional" and "authentic" as it applies to contemporary Alaska Native art and artists. With my research, I aim to examine Yup'ik art from different perspectives and to investigate the different cultural standards and definitions that exist about what constitutes "authentic" Yup'ik art and artists. Consumers, collectors, the government, and Yup'ik artists from diverse cultural backgrounds all have different concepts of what authentic, traditional Yup'ik art constitutes. I believe it is important to investigate Native art, as much as possible, without reservations and prejudgements as to their concepts of art and to listen closely to the artists' voice, especially when it contradicts our own perceptions.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

Page

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF OTHER MATERIALS

1. Introduction

There are many different ideas about what constitutes "traditional" or "authentic" indigenous culture. With my thesis, which focuses on the material production of Yup'ik Eskimo artists in southwest Alaska, I argue that outside viewers of Yup'ik objects perceive Yup'ik art in a significantly different way then the Yup'ik artists themselves. My research focuses on the different cultural standards that define Yup'ik art and artists as authentic and traditional from the point of view of the consumers and the producers of Yup'ik artwork. Rather then a stand alone document, this thesis serves as a suplement to my ethnographic film "A Way of Making Life Beautiful: Yup'ik Art Between Two Worlds" (Simon 2007). Many abstract ideas, that would have overburdened my film project are expressed in this written thesis. First, in my thesis I address the consumers' perceptions on Yup'ik art and their effects on the Yup'ik artists and their creations. What makes an artwork an authentic Yupik piece to early collectors, missionaries, the western art market, or the US government? What are the different expectations and stereotypes that exist about Yup'ik art in industrialised cultures and how are Yup'ik artists and their artwork influenced by these? Secondly, I investigated the Yup'ik artists view on their culturally specific work. What significance has culturally specific art for the Yup'ik people themselves? What elements, forms and meanings of their artistic objects do Yup'ik people accept as their own "traditional" artistic expression? How do Yup'ik artists regard the concept of tradition?

I first became interested in this subject the moment I realized that my idea of traditional Yup'ik art was influenced by my cultural background. While studying painting and graphic art at the Art Academy of Munich/Germany I became fascinated by Alaskan Eskimo art, which I had encountered in ethnographic museums and art books. Specifically Eskimo masks struck me as mysterious and exotic, they haunted my imagination and inspired my artwork. The exposure to Alaska Native culture through study-visits in Alaska, fieldwork and contacts with Native artists helped me to realize that my understanding of the objects and the people who make them was one-sided and it revealed more about my own cultural background, wants and ideals than those of the Native artists'.

Through my education in different cultural settings (e. g up-bringing in Germany, education in the United States of America), I experienced a rapid transformation of my view on Alaskan Native art and artists. As a result, I came to understand part of the impact of Euro-American society of mediating reproductions and representations of Native art—for example museums displays, and filmed or printed media about Alaska Native art. Outsiders seem to experience Native art through a lens of engrained circulating ethnographic images and ideas, which most often tell more about the authors' cultural background than the Native artists' view of their work. I hope to provide an objective interpretation of Yup'ik art and artists by considering the impact of Western influences on Yup'ik art, and by focusing on the different interpretations Yup'ik artists have on their own art. My foremost interest

concerns the native artists' conceptions of cultural authenticity. However, the outsiders' definitions are equally important, since they have powerful effects on the artists.

By examining Yup'ik art from different angles I aim to present, as much as possible, an all-embracing view of Yup'ik art. My study especially addresses consumers, collectors and scholars of the Euro-American world such as author Shirley Glubok, who still hold on to their romanticized image about the "hardy, cheerful people we call the Eskimo" (Glubok 1964: 4) and therefore place Native artists under pressure to prove their authenticity.

2. Fieldwork and Methods

To investigate Yup'ik art from the Yup'ik artists' perspective, fieldwork served as the basis for my study. To gain an understanding about the Yup'ik artists' view of their culturally specific art, I conducted and filmed thirty interviews with Yup'ik artists. During my fieldwork I worked for two month intensively with Yup'ik and Cup'ik Eskimo artists in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta/ southwest Alaska and Anchorage. I visited the following villages and cities during the period of May to August 2006: Bethel, Kwigillingok, Chevak, Hooper Bay, Scammon Bay, Mekoryuk and Anchorage.

The Central Yup'ik people are part of the larger family of Inuit cultures. There exist two dialects in the Yup'ik language—Yup'ik and Cup'ik—which are mutually intelligible. The names "Yup'ik" and "Cup'ik" refer to the Central Yup'ik peoples self designation and means "real" or "genuine" people. The Central Yup'ik peoples are members of the Yup'ik speaking not Inuit speaking branch. The Central Yup'ik people reside in one of the world's major coastal flood-plains, the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta in southwest Alaska (Oswalt 1979: 41). The Central Yup'ik Eskimo are often described by some of the foremost researchers and scholars of the 20th century, like Ann Fienup-Riordan or Dorothy Jean Ray, as the "most traditional" of all Eskimo groups (Fienup-Riordan 1996: 33-42).

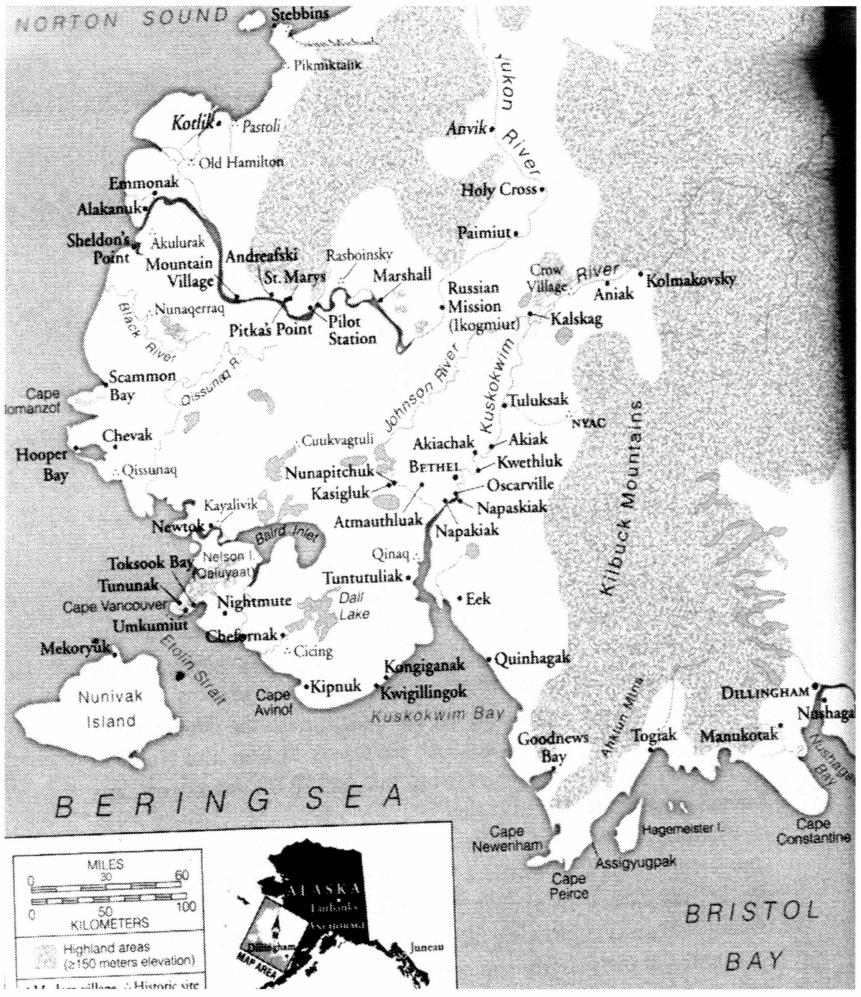


Figure 2.1: Map, Research Area: Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta (Fienup-Riordan 2000a)

My main research tools were face-to-face filmed interviews with Yup'ik artists from the village and the urban areas, and my observation of their artistic working methods. During the interview, I asked questions about working techniques, cultural background, artistic inspiration and traditional artwork in their culture. My goal was to understand each artist's concept of their culturally specific art, and to examine how cultural influences and outside expectations have affected their work.

My main consultants were Cup'ik artist, Earl Atchak from Chevak, Yup'ik artist, Felix Walker from Scammon Bay, and Yup'ik artist, Jack Abraham who lives in Anchorage.

Atchak, a widely acclaimed mask and doll maker, claims to be influenced by song writer and carver, John Pingayak, from whom Atchak has learned his carving skills. Since 1986, Atchak has been a professional artist, selling his work to galleries and collectors in the United States and Canada. He is famous for utilizing materials collected through subsistence activities. He creates detailed masks, dolls, jewelry and dioramas that depict "traditional" Yup'ik activities, such as hunting scenes and ceremonial dances. In 1990, Atchak composed a play that was performed at the SoHo Theatre in New York City. Today Atchak supports his family in Chevak by subsistence activities and the selling of his artwork (Fejes 2006).

Felix Walker is an elderly Yup'ik artist who was born in Hooper Bay in 1938 and joined the United States, Army National guard in his early 20's. Today, he practices a subsistence lifestyle in Scammon Bay and produces a variety of art works to support his family. His specialty is ivory carving, but Walker also collects other raw materials (such as roots, shells, bone, and wood) in the Scammon Bay region for making artwork for sale. Walker perceives art to be, foremost, a way to earn a living for himself and his family. He sells his work to traveling tourists, art markets in Bethel and at the Alaska Federation of Natives art sales.

My third major consultant is Yup'ik artist and musician Jack Abraham who originally comes from Tununak, but has been residing in Anchorage for almost ten years. He is a self-taught artist who specializes in mask and sculpture making. Abraham's inspiration comes from studying Yup'ik history and artifacts in museum collections and books. Abraham's work is featured in many Native art collections, such as the Doyon Corporation, the Anchorage Museum of History and Art, and the UA Museum of the North. He sells his work to galleries and collections in the United States and Canada. At the moment, he is working on a documentary film about abuse in native villages.

I interviewed Yup'ik and Cup'ik artists from diverse cultural backgrounds, such as artists involved in village life—for example the doll makers, Helen Hunter Smith from Hooper Bay, carver David Boyscout from Chevak, or mask maker Mike Herry from Mekoryuk—and artists that are more exposed to the global Western art system—like Franklin Matchian, or Jack Abraham who reside in Anchorage.

Interviews with art consumers, gift shop and gallery owners provided additional data. I consulted gallery owners, such as Yolanda Fejes, who displays Native art in Fairbanks, and Reyne Athanas, who owns an art gallery in Bethel. I also referred to Native gift shops in Anchorage, Fairbanks and Bethel. Those interviews revealed some of the non-Native definitions about Yup'ik art and expectations of Native artists and helped me to understand the outsiders' view of Native art.

3. The Western Perspective on Yup'ik Art

In this section I will address the various interpretations of tradition and authenticity that outsiders apply to Yup'ik art and artists. Consumers, collectors, missionaries, the government, and Yup'ik artists from diverse cultural backgrounds all have different concepts of what constitutes "authentic", "traditional" Yup'ik art. There are high expectations from the Western world for Native artists to continue working, in what they perceive as the "authentic" Yup'ik style. The question that arises is what the Euro-American Art world considers to be authentic Yup'ik art. Authenticity, according to sociologist Edward Shils, is most often equated by industrialized societies with tradition, the quality of pastness (Shils 1981: 18). What much literature defines as "traditional" Yup'ik art reflects the scholar's belief in an unspoiled, authentic culture, relatively uninfluenced by Western society (Bendix 1997: 3-23).

3.1 Early Investigation of Yup'ik Art

Most indigenous cultures lack the concept of art as a specific category of objects whose primary function is to give aesthetic pleasure. Given this, how was material culture transformed into art in the first place? In western culture, art separated itself into an independent realm and is purely appreciated for its aesthetic qualities. During the 1700's in Europe, a new definition of aesthetics developed for the first time, which distinguished between the artist as genius and the craftsperson as a technician. The concept of "art for art's sake" is a relatively new invention, even in Western society.

It arose out of the developments of enlightenment philosophy, a growing middle class, and new cultural institutions, such as museums and libraries. Before art separated into an independent realm in Europe, it was embedded in specific social contexts, and was made to order or as adornment, e.g. for a church (Shiner 2001: 75-77). The European concept of aesthetics before the 1700's—art as part of the larger social context—was probably much closer to the former place of art in Yup'ik culture. In European historical periods, such as the Renaissance, painters were more craftsmen than social critics. The same is true for traditional Yup'ik artistry. Traditionally, creating art objects was, foremost, a craft and only recently has art acquired the function of being a social critical instrument.

Explorers, traders, missionaries and teachers were the early collectors of what was considered at the time as "primitive" art, so-called "trophies of a primitive past", what we, nowadays, encounter in museum collections (Fienup-Riordan 1996: 46). When the first Westerners arrived in the Yup'ik area in the early 1800's, they applied their idea of art to the objects of the Yup'ik people. Early researcher and collector Edward Nelson, was named by the Yup'ik people as "the man who collected good – for nothing- things (Fitzhugh 1982: 32)". Nelson's nickname indicates the contrast between the collector's view of the objects and the Yup'ik peoples'.

Anthropologist Shelly Errington argues in her article, "What Became Authentic Primitive Art?" that objects that were not made as art had became "art" because they were claimed as artistic objects. Yup'ik artifacts were selected as "art

objects" by Europeans who viewed them as such at the time. Investigators of Yup'ik art imposed their own cultural concepts of art on the objects of a culture that viewed the same objects differently (Errington 1994: 121-126). Collectors overlooked the history, social context, and extent of meanings of the cultural objects they collected. Early Euro-American scholars such as Johan Adrian Jacobsen, Knud Rasmussen, and Edward W. Nelson categorized the objects that where either decorative or expressive in style as art. Collectors chose those objects as art because they were fascinated by the exoticism of this so-called "savage" art. It represented to them an unaffected and pure state, in contrast to the mass-produced goods they encountered during industrialization. Their mission was to salvage a disappearing past (Morphy and Perkins 2005:2-7). Additionally, native artistic objects represented to early Western researchers pre- or early forms of Western art. They presumed that "primitive art" would reveal the origin of humans' creativity (Fraser 1952: p. 52). First Colonial- and Voelkerkunde museums (St. Petersburg, Dresden, Copenhagen, Berlin and Hamburg) presented an overview of "primitive" life to the public but also demonstrated the "civilized" European societies' superiority. Until the beginning of the 20th century, a great variety of artifacts were assembled at the ethnographic museums as a result of the spread of imperialism around the world (Kreide-Damani 1992: 58-61).

The process of choosing objects as art, and then to collect and transport them to museums in Europe and America, then to display the objects as such, designated the selected objects as primitive art at the turn of 19th century.

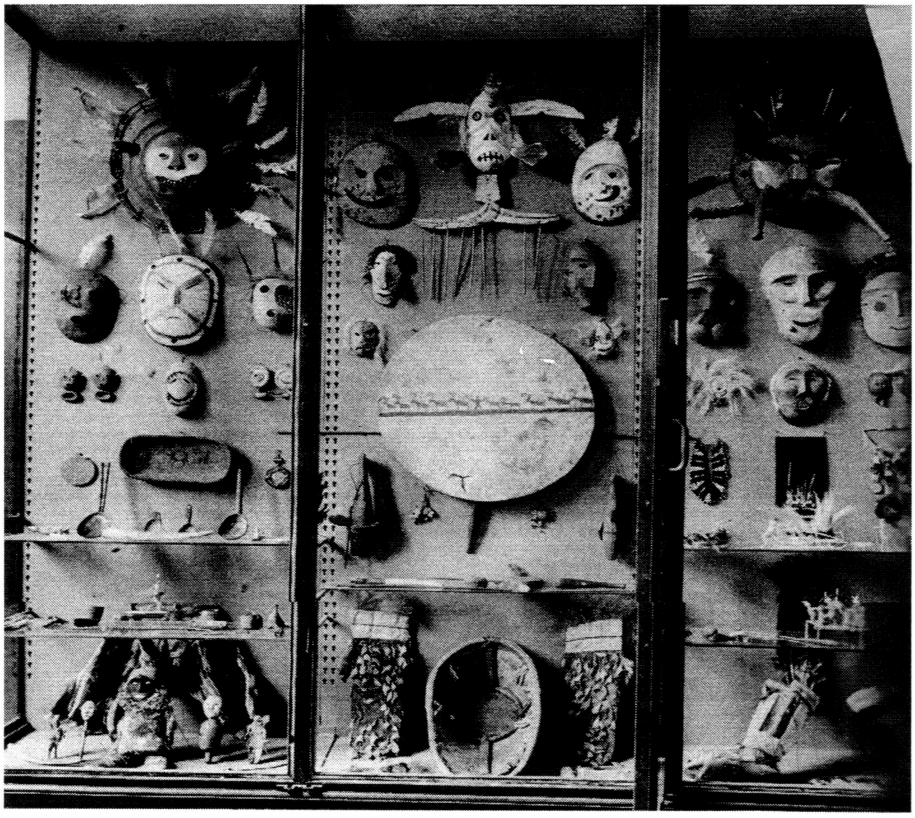


Figure 3.1.2: Photo, Voelkerkundemuseum Berlin, A. Jacobsen's Yup'ik collection, 1932 (Fienup-Riordan 1996)

Designating certain Yup'ik artifacts as primitive art determined the Euro-American concept of Eskimo art to this day. Museum displays, ethnographic books, and films most often present those objects as the constitutive, original art of Eskimo culture. Collectors overlooked the history, social context, and extent of meanings of the cultural objects they collected and displayed.

In the early 20th century, European artists of the modernist era, such as Max Ernst, discovered Yup'ik artifacts (Fraser 1952). Satiated by old traditions, the

vanguard was in search of new artistic forms of expression. The interest in the so-called "objects trouves" did not address their origin or context, but solely their formal elements (Foerster 2003: 222-224). Artists were fascinated by the fundamental logic of formal laws that led to the sculptures' "incomparable expression", as surrealist artist Max Ernst worded it (Kreide-Damani 1992: 33).

Objects that were collected in a period of ten to fifty years presently represent the entire history and tradition of a culture that existed for over 8000 years. The early collectors' choice of artifacts not only influenced the Westerners outlook of Eskimo art, but also the Yup'ik peoples view of it. For example, Yup'ik artist Jack Abraham observed, that if it were not for Edward Nelson, probably he would not have become the artist that he is today (Abraham 2006). Abraham sees Nelson as responsible for the preservation of objects that would have been lost at the time—in Yup'ik society ceremonial objects were often burned or were treated as by products. The selection of Yup'ik artifacts by early collectors gave direction on what Yup'ik artists choose to produce afterwards and what Yup'ik people consider today as their cultural heritage. Nelson's extensive account of objects collected in the Bering Strait region (Nelson 1983) often serves as a guide for Yup'ik artists in search of their artistic origins: "I carried it around so much, it was like my bible, and in a way I guess it was. This book was the only piece of clear evidence that my ancestors were ingenious people who created a beautiful life for themselves in a harsh environment (Abraham 2006)". Most professional Yup'ik artists use illustrations of artifacts, collected by scholars at the

turn of the last century and exhibition catalogs from art shows, such as the Yup'ik mask exhibit Agayuliyararput (Fienup-Riordan 1996), as a template for their work.

3.2 The Missionaries View on Yup'ik Art

Christian missionaries arrived in the Yup'ik area as early as the mid 1880's. They had a very different view on Yup'ik art. The many Christian groups, such as Jesuits, Moravians, and Covenants, were overwhelmed by the extravagance of Yup'ik objects and interpreted objects such as masks as an indication of heathen idolatry. Yup'ik artist Walker experienced the arrival of some of the missionaries:

> When missionaries came they stopped the dancing—it was a sin to do. They [the Yup'ik people] didn't know nothing about sin. I didn't see murders or stealers.
>
> Priests didn't know nothing about those demon masks, they never did know. But those people making their own masks, they did know it, what it was to be for, to use. They never speak any English anyways, so the priest wouldn't even know (Walker 2006).

Because of the existing of such a vibrant masking practice, the missionaries labeled the traditional Yup'ik way of worshiping as satanic even though they had no knowledge of the Yup'ik peoples' belief system. Cup'ik artist Mike Herry recounted the missionaries reasoning for their restriction on masked dances as follows: "The

devil wants you to have fun, and makes you forget about god and Jesus Christ—especially the second coming of Jesus Christ. While the people of Mekoryuk have lots of fun dancing and beating the drums, Jesus might come and leave them behind" (Herry 2006). The goal was to convert the "savage" to Christian ways (Beaver 1979: 30). As a result, all native religious ceremonies and artistic expressions related to it were suppressed (Fienup-Riordan 1996: 140-143). The following photo shows Yup'ik masks collected by the Moravian missionaries in Calitimiut/ southwest Alaska, in the 1920's. They were labeled as "heathen masks" and were later burned to demonstrate that the making of ceremonial masks has to stop.

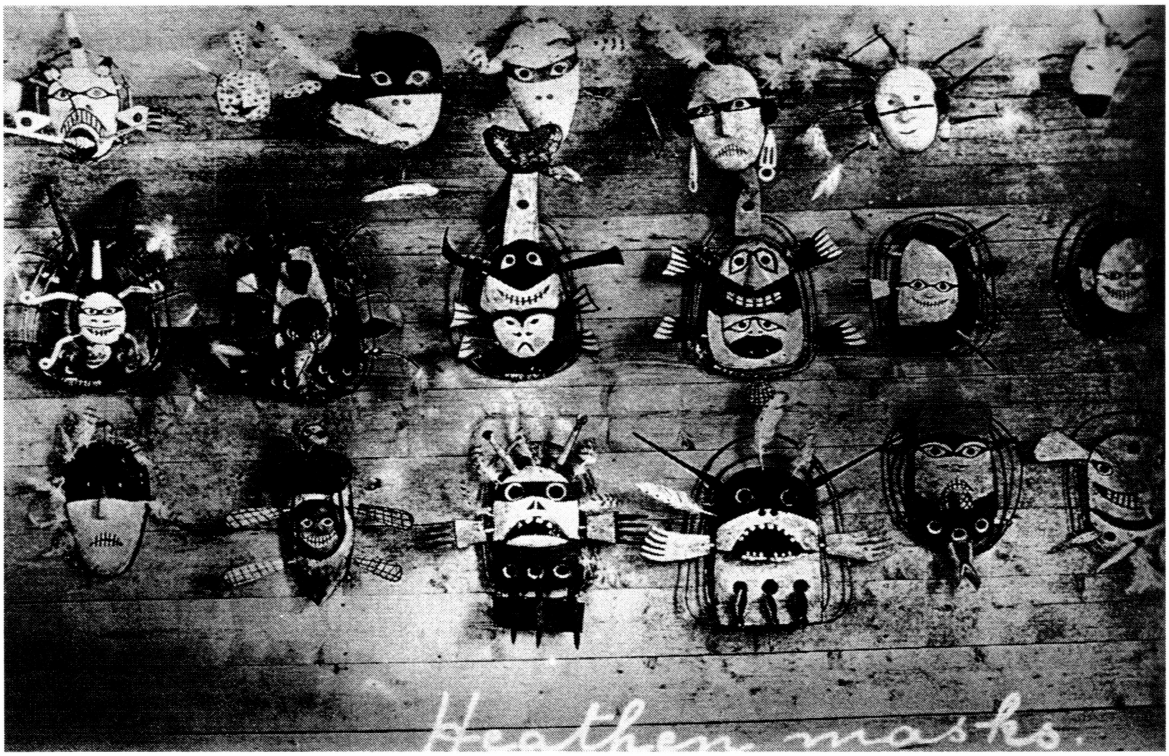


Figure 3.2.3: Photo, Yup'ik masks, labeled as heathen masks by missionaries; Calitimiut, 1920 (Fienup-Riordan 1996)

For many reasons, the Yup'iks' conversion into Christianity was rapid. Spreading epidemics, introduced by the western outsiders, accelerated the acceptance of the newly derived religion. Shamans were powerless to fight the introduced diseases and lost their position as wise men and healers of the Yup'ik communities; Instead, the missionaries, who had access to modern medicine, became the social regulators of the villages. In 1894, the Moravian missionaries proudly announced that no mask-dances were being performed anywhere from Bethel to Ougavig (Yup'ik village with Moravian missions) (Fienup-Riordan 1996: 144). By the end of the 1930s, all Yup'ik communities were more or less successfully converted to the Christian faith and most "superstitious ideas and disgusting practices (Bishop Gapp (1928) in Fienup-Riordan 1996: 144)" were abandoned. Yup'ik communities viewed new and old faith with ambiguity. Some community members revolted, secretly practicing their traditional ceremonies, while others quickly accepted Christianity as a pleasant alternative to their old belief system. Attracted to the Christian concept of an afterlife, many Yup'ik people became strong believers and advocates of their new religion. Traditional exchange feasts, religious ceremonies and masked dances were replaced e.g. the mission feast (Fienup-Riordan 1996: 145). Yup'ik dances (no masks could be used), if they were not yet eliminated, had to be scheduled around the Christian holy week and holy ceremonies.

The clash between traditional and imported beliefs affected the craftsmen and resulted in strong alternations of feature, form and meaning of the objects, as well as

the invention of new art forms. Anthropologist, Lynn A. Wallen, compared the past features of Yup'ik masks to the style of Yup'ik masks created for a Disney production in the 1930's.

Figure 3.2.4: Photo, Masked dance in Hooper Bay for 1946 Milotte film production shows masks with pleasing facial expressions (Wallen 1994)

Wallen states that traditional spiritual motifs, such as the yua face, thumb-less hands, and spectacles, were still incorporated in the masks made for the film production, but in a very different way. Mask faces were cheerful and, as a result, not as dramatic and powerful as on the traditional dance masks. The toothy grins and frightening features

that once made reference to dangerous spirits were replaced by friendly, non-threatening facial expressions (Wallen 1994: 19). The faces also appear less abstract; forms seem identifiable and balanced and replace the formerly distorted and asymmetrical features. Molly Lee, curator of ethnology at the UA Museum of the North describes in her article, "Spirits into Seabirds", the stylistic transformation of Masks from Nunivak Island through the influence of the Evangelical Covenant Church. The churches' rejection of idolatry (explicitly refused by the Covenant Church) caused the change of the anthropomorphic human-like yua faces into animal depictions. The following photo shows a bird mask from Nunivak Island with a yua face, depicting a fox, in its center, as a replacement of the former human-like yua face (Lee 2000: 5-12):

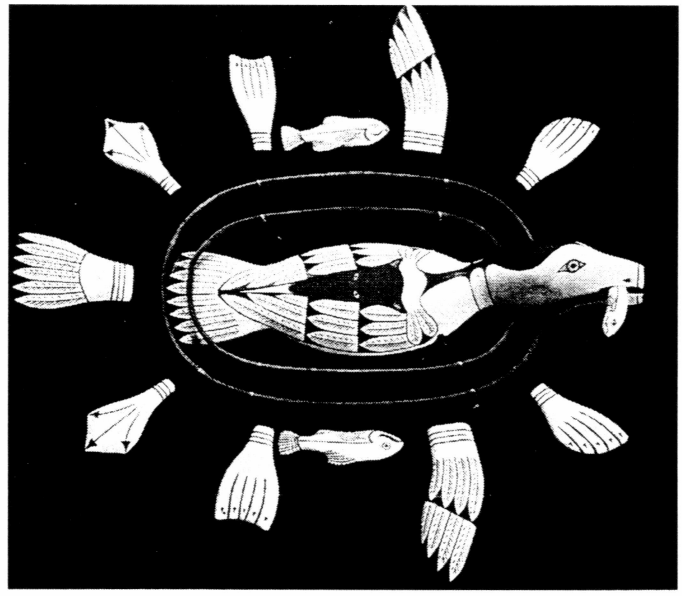


Figure 3.2.5: Photo, Nunivak Island bird mask, 1982 (University of Alaska Museum of the North)

3.3 Yup'ik Art for Sale and Consumers' Expectations

Since manufacturing crafts for trade and sale did not contradict the newly arrived religion, Yup'ik people produced crafts to make an income. Atchak explains what art became to the Yup'ik people in the last hundred years: "The word for art today is calinguaq, it means not real work—fake work (Atchak 2006)". Yup'ik people began to make carvings and other artistic objects under very different conditions (Lee 2000: 10). Artist Mike Herry from Mekoryuk described, that when the missionaries came to Nunivak Island, the habitants stopped making ceremonial masks but made masks to sell (Herry 2006). The objects lost their spiritual dimension; they became detached from their original purposes, namely to pay tribute to the land and animals. Boyscout explains that Yup'ik art in the old days was made for a higher purpose and originated with the shaman, but with the influence of missionaries and teachers, art became widespread. Anyone could create artwork—and anyone's ideas could be the source of this work (Boyscout 2006).

Masks, baskets, bowl, dolls, clothing, and ivory carvings became popular artwork that could be exchanged for western tools, food, and clothing and later for cash. At first, artists sold their work to local trading posts, western transients and traders, teachers or missionaries. Later, art markets (e. g at the Camai dance festival or Alaska Federation of Natives art sale), galleries, and gift shops in Bethel or Anchorage offered an avenue for selling artwork (in addition, artwork is still sold at village stores and to teachers, missionaries and visitors of villages). The following photos show

examples of old and new markets for selling Yup'ik artwork—a trading post in Mekoryuk in the 1940's and the Saturday market in Bethel, that is held in the summer, and offers a selling opportunity today.

Figure 3.3.6: Photo, Storekeeper, Mekoryuk/ Nunivak Island (Anchorage Museum of History & Art, Archives: AMRC-b03-11-2)

Figure 3.3.7: Photo, Saturday market, Bethel (Simon 2007)

As the cash economy reached Yup'ik communities, people became increasingly dependent on Western goods and needed money to secure them and to support their families and community. Basket maker, Flora Jack from Mekoryuk, observed that a long time ago baskets were like cash—she sold her first basket as a child, for 50 cents, in the local store (Jack 2006). People with artistic talent were able to sell their work and became the wealthier members of Yup'ik communities (Weston 2006). This process continues today: producing art is one of the few ways to make money in the villages without being tied to a labor job and having a western work schedule, that would cut down on subsistence activities. Most Yup'ik artists I consulted in the villages told me that they work to survive—to buy groceries, stove oil, and gasoline. For instance, according to Yup'ik artist Felix Walker: "You could make a good living with your artwork if buyers are available. Today gasoline prices are high; I sell my carvings higher too" (Walker 2006). To this day, choosing the profession of artist allows for maintaining a lifestyle connected to subsistence activities, and tied to the animal cycle. Having your own schedule and not having to work for someone seems to appeal to many Yup'ik people living in the village. Walker explained his reason for being an artist: "You are boss on your own when you are good. You can quit anytime you want to." Walkers statement reflects the past, traditional working attitude, which was connected to the animal cycle rather than to Western working hours (Walker 2006).

Starting in the 1880's when the first Alaska Native art works were sold, Yup'ik art made for sale gained a wide audience (Fienup-Riordan 1996: 153). Soon, an art market was established that placed high expectations of the Native artists to continue working in the "authentic" style. The question that arises is what does the outsider consider to be authentic Yup'ik art?

The Western notion of art reflects a search for purity and authenticity. When purity can't be found in our own material culture, we look for it elsewhere. As Dean MacCannell points out in his study "The Tourist": "reality and authenticity are thought to be elsewhere: in other historical periods and other cultures, in purer, simpler lifestyles" (MacCannell 1976: 3). Modernization and progress, on the other hand, signal instability and inauthenticity (MacCannell 1976: 1-4). The fear of having lost our own cultural values and identity draws citizens of Western societies to search for authenticity in other cultures, in hopes of regaining part of their own past cultural identity (Bendix 1997: 6-8). Reyne Athanas, owner of an art gallery in Bethel, told me in an interview about her experiences with the consumers:

> Tourists stereotype Native art–they just want it very traditional. Native artists that expand their ideas, experiment, make alteration, they have a tough time selling their stuff—people don't like change. People didn't like the impressionists. Every time there is a change it's hard on the first ones that are doing it (Athanas 2006).

To produce for the Western market meant adjusting to the buyers' wants and ideals. Crafts that were acceptable to the public and fit "their preconception of what is typical and appropriate (Graburn 1976: 15)" were much easier to sell. Finely carved, complex and symmetrical worked art pieces conformed more to the buyers' taste, than distorted, roughly worked objects. Of course, different buyers had different expectations of how "real" Yup'ik art should look. There is no single category of buyers. Museum collectors might be more interested in a "traditionally" worked masterpiece while traveling tourists from Europe, Asia or America might be more interested in purchasing an affordable souvenir that suited their living space. The following photo illustrates a popular artwork for sale, the Eskimo yo-yo, which is often bought by traveling tourists.

Figure 3.3.8: Photo, Visitor with an Eskimo yo-yo, Anchorage, 1985 (Anchorage Museum of History & Art, Archives: AMRC-b85-27-1208)

Certain characteristics, a set of peculiar features, must be recognizable to the outside purchaser to make the Native artwork appealing such as the hoops and appendages on Yup'ik masks, as this photo of a Yup'ik mask sold on e-bay shows (Graburn 1976:1-32).

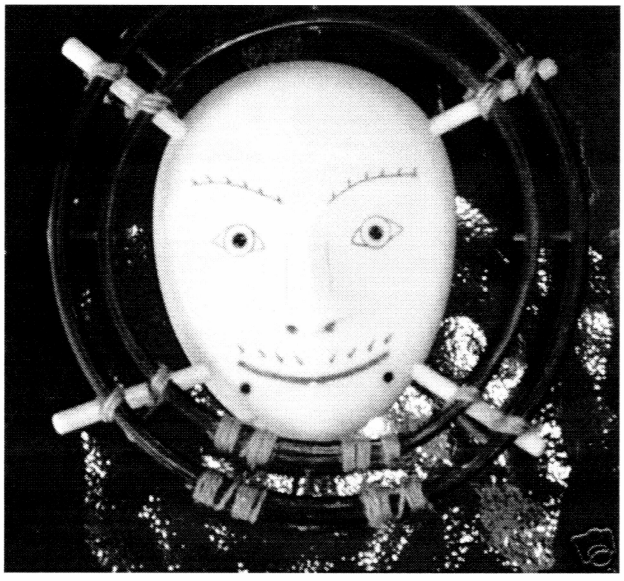


Figure 3.3.9: Photo, Yup'ik mask for sale on eBay (Online Marketplace), diameter: 14 cm, made with ivory and wood (www.ebay.com 2005)

Most buyer demands conformity of style to the salient characteristics of Yup'ik elements. According to art historian Larry Shiner, the externally imposed idea of authenticity became an ideology that recognized as real Native art, only work in the inherited local styles and techniques. "Authenticity" became a term defined by the Western market and had little to do with a situating of the object in old traditions (Shiner 1994: 271).

Not all effects of the outside market on Yup'ik art were negative. In some cases, the adaptation to consumers' demands led to innovations of art forms and traditions. As new technologies became introduced, people took on those forms and made it their own. Some of those objects where proclaimed as authentic, others as inauthentic. If an object was perceived as deeply rooted in the "unspoiled" Yup'ik former tradition and was made as an original by an individual, the buying public would consider it as real Yup'ik art. In contrast, they valued less the objects that they viewed as reproductions, made for commerce solely. For a long time buyers considered Yup'ik art for sale as a lower, less authentic art. This trend is reflected in early studies about Eskimo art, such as Shirley Glubok's account "The Art of the Eskimo", which usually do not incorporate the aspect of market art and only present objects that fit the outsider's nostalgic ideas of "authentic" Eskimo artwork, such as a ceremonial mask, as it is presented on the cover of Glubok's book (Glubok 1964: 1).

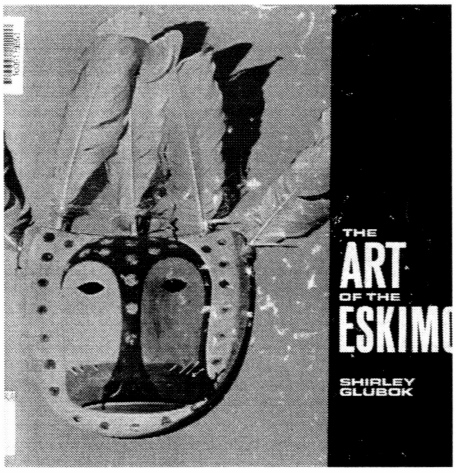


Figure 3.3.10: Photo, Book cover "The Art of the Eskimo" by Shirley Glubok (Glubok 1964)

Dorothy Jean Ray was the first scholar to include souvenir art in a non-judgmental way besides "traditional" objects in her analysis (Ray 1977). Equally groundbreaking was the work of anthropologist Nelson Graburn; He addresses the transformation of fourth world art through the western market place. Graburn describes the effect of commercialization on traditional form, function and material. In Yup'ik art, local materials were combined with new materials, such as different kind of wood, plastic, acrylic colors, etc. New tools were incorporated, and form and function changed to a degree that it would be useful for the Western buyer (e. g. hooks to hang a mask up replaced the mouthpiece necessary to wear it for dancing). Objects that in former times expressed Yup'ik religious beliefs were now being made for the mass market (Graburn 1976: 1-32).

3.4 "Authentic" Yup'ik Art from the Government's Perspective

The federal government plays an important role in the distinction of Native Artists from non-Natives Artists. The Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990 provides a legal definition of American Indian Artists (all Native cultures of Alaska are included):

> The Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990 (P.L. 101-644) is a truth-in-advertising law that prohibits misrepresentation in marketing of Indian arts and crafts products within the United States. It is illegal to offer or display for sale, or sell any art or craft product in a manner that falsely suggests it is Indian produced, an Indian product, or the product of a

> particular Indian or Indian Tribe or Indian arts and crafts organization, resident within the United States (www.gov/iacb/act.html 2006).

Only members of a state- or federally recognized tribe or Native community can market their work as "Native-made". Violations of that law result in fines and prison sentences.

The law can be viewed from two perspectives: on the one hand, it supports and protects many Native Artists from competition by non-Native artists that claim a Native identity, and mass-produce native artwork or artifacts (such as falsely labeled imports from Asian countries). Former parts of the law, enacted in 1935, remit criminal penalties for the sale of objects that intentionally suggest that they are of Native origin but are made by non-Natives. On the other hand, the Indian Arts and Crafts Act disadvantages Native artists who do not fit the laws' definition of an "Indian artist" (blood quantum, degree of Native ancestry or proof of tribal membership). Moreover, the law can be seen as another form of colonialism, in that it "constructs a regulatory" (Turner 1999: 46) for being Native American. The conventions and labels of Euro-American societies hinder Native artists from creating art that expresses anything other then past values, history and Native culture (Turner, 1999: 46-49).

4. The Yup'ik Artist's Concepts of "Authenticity"

4.1 The Concept of Art in Past Yup'ik Society

In pre-contact times, Yup'ik artistry comprised of the beautifying of everyday objects and the making of art objects for ceremonial purposes. Yup'ik artistic expressions could be as simple as fishing implements or as complex as ritualistic masks. The western concept of "art for art's sake"—art that stands outside of practical function—did not exist in Yup'ik culture until the late 18th century. The making, performing and usage of "art" always served a purpose and were integrative components of the larger context of social life (Schneider 2001: 106). Artistic expression was the peoples' spiritual and material representation of their world (Fienup-Riordan 1990: 49-67).

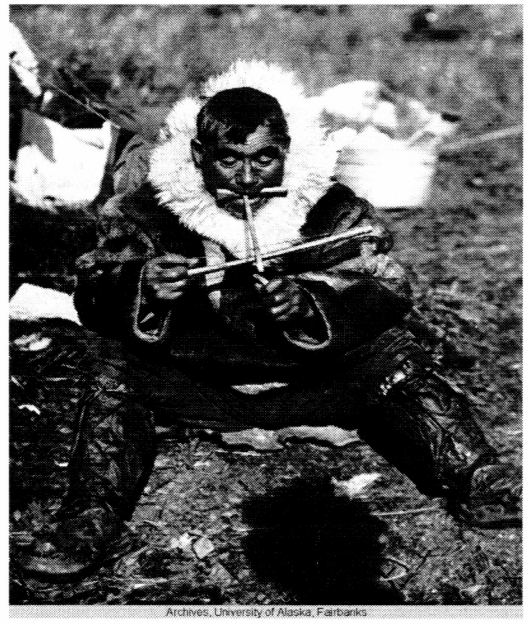


Figure 4.1.11: Photo, Man uses bow drill to engrave ivory, (1928) (University of Alaska Fairbanks, Archives: UAF-1977-30-4)

Earlier in history, the Yup'ik people had diverse ways of beautifying their objects; most groups used specific design elements that distinguished everyday objects and paraphernalia. Yup'ik doll maker Helen Hunter Smith, from Hooper Bay explained: "Everybody had their own trademark, just like social security—Hooper Bay had their own marks; they used it on wolverine hangers and even on the fish they cut (Hunter-Smith 2006)". Communities and families would characterize their goods and utensils with explicit designs to differentiate their objects from other groups.

Decorations and ornaments on everyday tools, such as hunting implements and sewing utensils, could also endow objects with spiritual power. Through these decorations, a connection between the spirit world, the hunted animals, and the harvested land was established in order to assure the acquiring of food for the community. Artistry was the Yup'ik peoples' way to communicate with the spirit world. In the Yup'ik peoples' former animistic belief system, every object, animal or human would possess a spirit. The underlying idea behind creating artistic objects was to pay tribute to the animals they hunted in order to gain food and maintain the well-being of the community.

Another form of ensuring survival and maintaining the social order in a community was through the making and performative use of ceremonial objects, such as masks and figurines. Art in past Yup'ik society had many components; an object was not only a visual representation but was taken into different realms through use and performance. Elderly artist Felix Walker from Scammon Bay stated:

> When there would be big ceremony dances…dancers make their own mask…they decorated them; every decoration is performed in the song. You look at it—it's just like a nice decoration. But when they sing, they use all those decorations; it's just like a song mask…They believe it, they admit it, like witchcraft … I asked my mom: after all this work, after a big dance, they burned it, burned everything what they worked, the masks only. I asked my mom: how come they do that, those beautiful masks and they burned it. (She said) They do not want them to lose their power—if I hang it on my wall or play with it, they lose their power (Walker 2006).

Walker's statement shows that ritual objects functioned beyond their materiality. The object achieved its full function through its use in dance performances and the subsequent burning in the men's house. The artwork was only part of a larger act of petition to the spirit world.

Most likely, the making and use of ritualistic objects originated in the shaman's bond to the spirit world. Cup'ik artist, David Boyscout, from Chevak explained that the making of art did not arise out of a single person's random idea. Boyscout views "art" as a product of the shaman in his endeavor to help his fellow villagers. A shaman would commission a mask or would carve it himself to use it as a tool with which he could foresee the status of returning game animals (Boyscout

2006). In the Yup'ik peoples' earlier worldview, there was a spiritual connection between predator, the tool or ritualistic object, and the hunted animal. Atchak described that, in the past, any hunter who wished to catch a certain animal would make a representation of that animal by carving a mask. Afterwards, in the men's house, the mask was burned to complete a prayer to the animal and, therefore, persuade the animal's spirit to give itself to the hunter. Atchak compares today's artwork and Yup'ik artistry of the past as the following:

> One hundred years ago they used masks for a purpose, and that was to make a prayer, to get the food. They made a seal mask and then they burn it and then they eat from the seal. Nowadays I make that mask, sell it to someone; I make a bunch of money and buy a bunch of food. So somehow that purpose is still the same but a little different (Atchak 2006).

The concept of art that existed in past Yup'ik society is very different than today's western concept of "high" or "fine" art. "Art" in Yup'ik society tied together various components of life, such as rituals, entertainment, dance and songs, stories and past events, and everyday activities (Bunten 2006: 325). In the course of the last two centuries, the imposed western concept of art has had, and will continue to have, powerful effects on Yup'ik artistry. Through the influences of explorers and missionaries, and the introduction of the cash economy and western school systems to the villages, the purposes and forms of Yup'ik art have rapidly changed.

4.2 Effects of Outsiders Expectations on Yup'ik Artists

Contemporary Yup'ik artists often struggle with cultural expectations and assigned roles imposed upon them by Euro-American Society and their static mainstream images of the "authentic" Native artist. As a student of the art academia of Munich/ Germany, I experienced the high expectations of the Western art world on the artist first hand. The art world's conventions and definitions demand that the Western artist creates work that is pure and innovative, and reveals a deeper truth. While the Euro-American art world selects individual genius that produces self-guided, original expressions in their own society as artists, the expectations on the Native artists are to create traditional work. What much literature and critics define as "traditional" Native art reflects the scholar's belief in an unspoiled, authentic culture, relatively uninfluenced by Western society (Bendix 1997: 7-9).

Many people think of tradition as frozen in time, as if it has stopped at some point. According to Native artist Da-ka-xeen Mehner from southeast Alaska, the Westerners' presume that Native Americans need to create works that represents their cultural heritage. The outsiders' presumption assumes that the culture is no longer evolving (Xeen-Mehner 2006).

According to Graburn, Western society "bemoans the lack of tradition (Graburn 1976: 13)" and considers the change in style as destructive because they do not realize that the artist himself considers his work as real and part of his tradition. What Aldona Jonaitis, director of the UA Museum, calls the "purity paradigm" (Jonaitis in Ray

1995: 2) restricts Yup'ik artists' possibilities and creativity and discourages innovations (Lee in Jones 2003: p. 34). The conventions and labels of Euro-American societies impedes Native artists from creating art that expresses anything other than past values, history and Native culture (Turney 1999: 20).

Figure 4.2.12: Photo, Eskimo landscape painting with tourist (Anchorage Museum of History & Art, Archives)

The photo represents the nostalgic idea that some non-Natives have of the Eskimos, living in harsh, remote places and practicing subsistence activities. Anthropologist Laura Turney argues that Native artists, because of buyers' expectations, are put in a position of proving the authenticity of their culture. The Western market constructs the Native artists' identities. "Stereotypical symbols and signs (Turney 1999: 20)" identify

the Native artists as authentic. Since most Native artists depend on the income of their artwork and Westerners are the buyers of their work, artists need to perpetuate the Euro-American "nostalgic fantasy (Walking Stick in Turney 1999: 21)".

Cultural definitions and labels can create a "burden of shame (Garoutte 2002: 48)" in the Native artist, an insecurity about the authenticity of their past. Artist Jimmie Durham (Cherokee) states that Native Americans prove their authentic Indian identity by producing crafts that are labeled as real Indian art because "it makes them feel Indian (Durham in Turney 1999: 49)".

4.3 The Cultural Revival of Yup'ik Art

Native artists' identities are not only constructed by Western society, many Yup'ik artists seem to identify themselves with their artwork. They consider it a part of their heritage even certain elements of their work are adapted from Western culture and it might have been produced 'just' for sale (Graburn 1976: 13). Invented traditions such as contemporary Yup'ik doll making, have become a symbol with which many Yup'ik people identify and which represents them as an ethnic group to the public (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983: 148-150). Yup'ik people themselves conceive ideas about what constitutes their culture. For example, the Yup'iks' experienced rapid change during a period of Christian conversion and many became strict believers in Christianity; yet a sense of "Yupikness" remained as former traditions were reinvented through combining old beliefs with new elements of their lives.

Many Yup'ik people express nostalgia for their past and express this now in the revival of songs, ceremonies and art objects. Walker describes his continuation of traditional Yup'ik artistry in his work as:

> I was glad I learned what kind of masks they were making [in the past]. Just like they [his ancestors] left me a will to do it myself, but I was not demon or magician. But I copied what they were making. ...When I lay down, I think about those. So I start making mask of what I've seen (Walker 2006).

Figure 4.3.13: Photo, Mask workshop, Bethel 1982 (Fienup-Riordan 1990)

Starting in the 1980's, art workshops have been held in different Yup'ik communities to foster the lost knowledge of former artistic skills. Mask makers in a

workshop in Bethel in 1982 (photo above), that anthropologist Ann Fienup-Riordan observed, did not consider their masks as meaningless even though they were no longer used in ceremonies. Rather, they used traditional stylistic elements and connected visions and stories to their works that were rooted in their old belief system of their cultural area (Fienup-Riordan 1996: 150). As a result of this cultural revival, many Yup'ik artists began to consider their work no longer solely a way to make money but also as a means of regaining consciousness about their values; with their work, they are able to make a stand in a society dominated by mainstream ideals. That process is ongoing.

In Mekoryuk, on Nunivak Island, Yup'ik artwork has been exclusively made for sale since the 1930's. The artists developed a refined and specific art style (e.g. the Nunivak walrus ivory tusks or the ivory puffin masks—photo below), which the community identifies with and which represents them to the public as an ethnic group.

Figure 4.3.14: Photo, Ivory Puffin Mask by Samuel Shavings (Simon 2007)

Today, the artists on Nunivak Island and elsewhere in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta put considerable effort into passing on their specific art style to the younger generation. In most Yup'ik and Cup'ik communities I visited, the schools offer special programs to teach children Yup'ik craftsmanship. There, elders offer to share their knowledge about Yup'ik cultural heritage, traditional working techniques, and the use and meaning of art to children that want to learn. Nevertheless, the younger generation as a whole does not show much interest in learning about Yup'ik cultural heritage. Most young people are absorbed by "pop-culture", as artist Abraham worded it. Like teenagers everywhere, they prefer video games, TV programs, and latest music and clothing trends; meanwhile, they abandon their cultural heritage (Abraham 2006). For this reason, some elderly artists, such as artist Mike Herry of Mekoryuk, refuse to demonstrate their skills to the younger generation. He told me that in early times, the younger generation gravitated to elders and gained expertise in Yup'ik artistry by watching older artists manufacturing their work. However, today most young people do not take the time to consult the elders to learn their artistic skills. Because the young generation shows less and less interest in learning their handicraft, mostly elderly artists regard their artistry as dying or soon to be extinct (Herry 2006).

4.4 Melding Traditions

It is hard to separate adapted Western expectations from the Yup'ik people's conceptions of cultural authenticity. Artists include introduced elements into their

work and create new styles that are incorporated into Yup'ik tradition. Just as industrialized cultures are increasingly a melting pot of cultures from all over the world, the Native people of Alaska, Siberia, Canada and Greenland influenced and borrowed artistic expressions from each other for millennia.

As a result of colonialism, globalization, and the mass media, artistic trends are increasingly multicultural. The global discourse influences the categorization of art-objects cross-culturally; but even in pre-contact times, Yup'ik culture was by no means isolated, and unchanging. Rather, it changed very slowly—elements that are, today, viewed as "traditionally Yup'ik" certainly evolved in the past. Yup'ik artists always worked in a variety of cultural traditions and tradition cannot be seen as an inalterable continuum but rather as flexible – constructed by different groups reflecting their cultural background, views and wishes. It is a self-renewable system that bolsters cultural identification. Today's emphasis on aboriginal empowerment might positively effect the Yup'ik peoples' identification with their invented traditions, as many of them separate themselves from mainstream Western art through their specifically Yup'ik art style.

In short, art seems to be a way for the artist to define his or her identity and artwork takes different forms depending on an artist's notion of identity. The artists' concept of Yup'ik art varies, depending on age, character, location of upbringing and residence, cultural background, and degree of involvement in the Western art system. It would be improper to speak of a single standardized Yup'ik art form—there are

multiple methods, techniques, styles and meanings of art objects within Yup'ik culture. Artists or craftsmen that are involved in village life and practice mostly a subsistence lifestyle have a different view of art than an artist who was mainly exposed to Western art education, or was raised or resides in the city.

4.4.1 Yup'ik Artists in the Village

Many artists, born and raised in their Native communities, view their work less as a way of expressing their personal worldview, but mostly as a way to earn a living to provide for their kin. The work is only in rare occasions made for personal usage—e.g. a mom would keep the first basket that their daughter made.

Figure 4.4.1.15: Photo, Artists Silas and Susie Shavings, Mekoryuk (Simon 2007)

Figure 4.4.1.16: Photo, Doll maker Helen Hunter-Smith, Hooper Bay (Simon 2007)

As a general rule, the quality of artwork, created in rural areas is outstanding—artistic skill and the excellence of craftsmanship came to the fore—as the work of Silas and Susie Shavings and Helen Hunter-Smith show (photo above). Most artwork incorporates local materials, such as fur, ivory, bone, organic pigments or grass, with new materials, such as different kinds of wood, plastic, acrylic colors, etc. Objects made by artists involved in village life comprise mostly of local subject matter and include traditionally used elements (such as depiction of game animals in mask forms). Perpetuating of what the artists consider to be their cultural heritage seems to be most important. Walker conceives of art foremost as a way to earn a living for himself and his family; but it also is a tie to his ancestors, and the stories and memories of his past. Walker learned to do artwork by watching his father and other elders in the community: "In memorizing all those things, what I have seen or what I heard, I could do them in artwork too—Tell stories, make a book out of this…I made art of all the masks that I've seen… You never forget about what you have seen in your time" (Walker 2006).

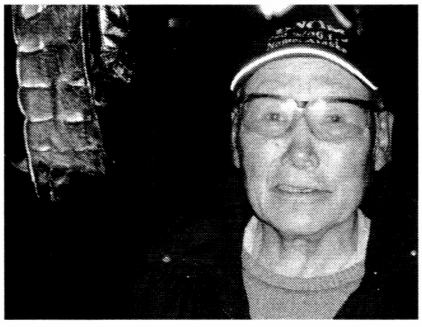


Figure 4.4.1.17: Photo, Yup'ik artist Felix Walker in his fish camp by Scammon Bay (Simon 2007)

Similarly, artwork made by the elderly artists in the villages is based on past experiences, their memories, and the stories of their culture. Their inspiration derives from the artwork of the previous generation. Although its purpose is to be sold, the work also seems to be an important tie to their heritage and reflects the continuation of Yup'ik tradition. In the past, Yup'ik artistry was intended to secure the well-being of the community by connecting to the spirit world. Nowadays, the artists craft artwork to make money to support their families and the community. One of the traditional functions of Yup'ik art—to ensure and secure the comfort of the community—is carried on in today's work.

4.4.2. Yup'ik Artists in the City

Young Yup'ik artists, such as Walker Jr., often experience additional art education outside the village, such as at the University of Alaska Fairbanks Native Art Studio. Yup'ik artists that are more involved in the Western art system, e.g. those who attend western art institutions, have a connection to galleries, or have lived temporarily or fulltime in the city, produce artwork that comprises different forms and meanings than artwork made by artists mainly living village life—such as the art pieces of Yup'ik artist's Lawrence Beck, who uses cooking utensils and collects materials from Junk yards for his work (photo below).

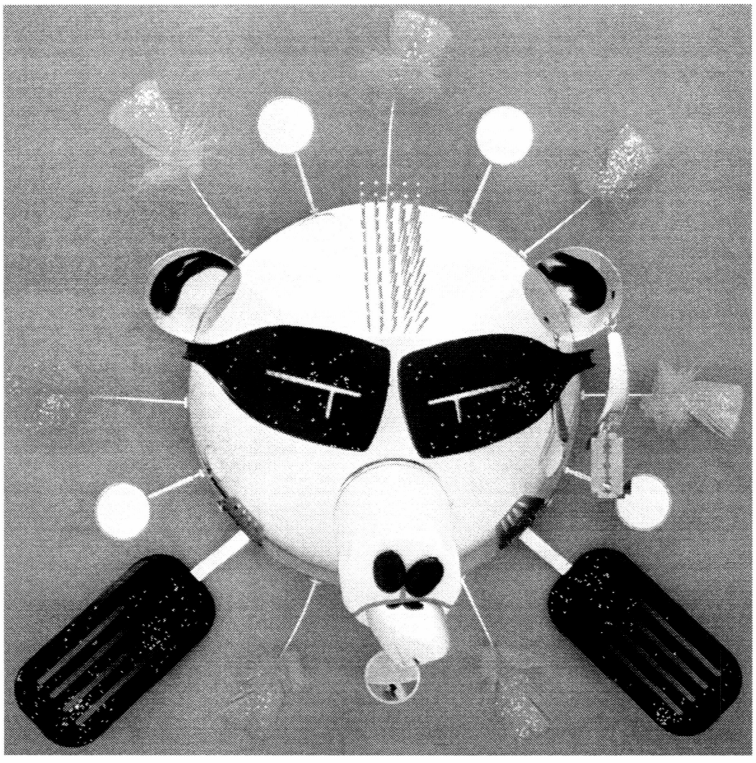
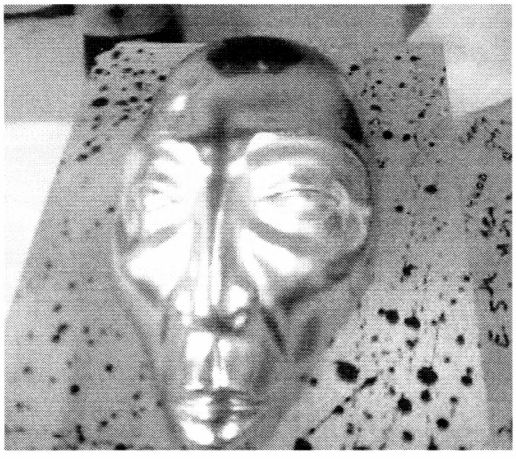


Figure 4.4.2.18 : Photo, Mask made by Lawrence Beck, cooking utensils (Hirschfelder 1994)

Yup'ik artists who are less involved in the traditional lifestyle emphasize their personal worldview and often use their art as a form of social critic (e. g. artists address topics such as alcoholism or sexual abuse in Native communities). The emphasis is rooted more in the artists' philosophical ideas and personal worldview, than on traditional skill and artistic quality. The underlying purpose of producing artwork as a way to support the community loses significance. Yup'ik artists exposed to western art education have adapted to the Western concept of art. Art evolves from a single person's idea and not, as in previous Yup'ik artistry, from a spiritual

connection to the natural world and made and performed as a collective act to secure the social order of the community. Many artists include the Western visual, formal language but still incorporate a set of formal elements that are accepted as "traditional Yup'ik". The work of Yup'ik artist Abraham, expresses the battle of a Native artist in an art world empowered by western ideals (photos below).



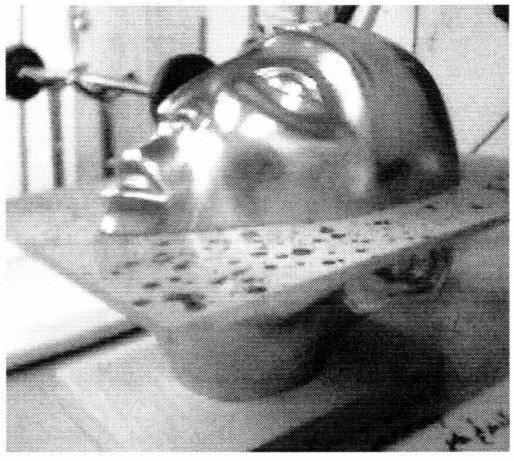


Figure 4.4.2.19: Photo, Sculpture made by Jack Abraham, material: metal and glass, title: Silver Surfer, 2006 (Abraham 2006)

Abraham straddles the values of two cultures; on one hand, he identifies with Yup'ik culture, and on the other hand, he feels part of the western world. Abraham revealed in an interview that he cannot escape the fact that he is Yup'ik, but neither can he escape that he is a modern person just like everybody else; He expressed that he is "a contemporary artist that happened to be of Yup'ik descent" (Abraham 2006).

5. Conclusion: Continuation of the Yup'ik Way through Yup'ik Art

Elders in the village eye contemporary Yup'ik artwork critically. Artists, such as Jack Abraham, produce work that stress social critical subjects such as physical abuse or identity crises, and uses modern materials such as electronic devices in conjunction with traditional materials and forms. When I mentioned Abraham's name to other Yup'ik artists, living in the villages, some of them rejected his work as too modern and too far removed from traditional Yup'ik artistic expression. Often, the older generation cannot identify with the novel artwork that strays to far from the accepted traditional Yup'ik formal language. The question that arises is what constitutes traditional Yup'ik art from the Yup'ik people's perspective?

Boyscout and Walker Sr., considered ceremonial objects, used by shamans in the past, to be the essence of Yup'ik art. Most artists expressed that paraphernalia and utensils made by their ancestors, represent the source of their culturally specific art (Boyscout 2006). Yup'ik artistic heritage serves as guide for most contemporary Yup'ik artists. Artists select and use similar materials, tools and formal elements as their ancestors and accept those as "traditional Yup'ik".

"Traditional" Yup'ik artistry includes:

- collecting materials from the land
- consulting elders about working techniques—learning by watching the experts
- using partly traditional tools (e. g crooked knife and ax)

- excellence of craftsmanship and perfectionism in their work
- contributing to the family or community (today through selling) through their work
- resuming traditional forms in memory of their ancestors

Yup'ik artistic tradition is not obvious in the sense that today's artwork exactly represents the meaning and form of ancient ceremonial or utilitarian artwork. Rather, what seems to be perpetuated in today's artwork is the underlying intention of producing art in a manner that is accepted as part of the Yup'ik way of life. As artist Eula David told me, "We don't want to lose our Yup'ik values. We want it to go on and that our kids pick it up (David 2006)". She showed me her artwork for sale—coiled baskets, earrings and knitted caps- all made in recently introduced techniques. Atchak describes today's artistry as combining traditional intention with non-traditional methods. Yup'ik artistic methods can be manifold: store bought materials are combined with materials collected from the land, objects are processed both with power tools and ancient tools, forms that are accepted as traditional Yup'ik are combined with formal elements of other culture (such as Yup'ik artist Chuna McIntyre's garments which are decorated with Celtic designs).

Yup'ik artwork changes along with the time—rapidly within the last century through the Western influences. As long as the inventions in Yup'ik people's artistic expressions do not entirely reject their Yup'ik culture, they are accepted as part of the Yup'ik peoples' tradition—such as Franklin Matchian's artwork, that includes

elements and ideas of both cultures-the Yup'ik and the Western. He uses traditional material, such as walrus ivory but depicts Western subject matters such as Leonardo da Vinci's Madonna (photo).

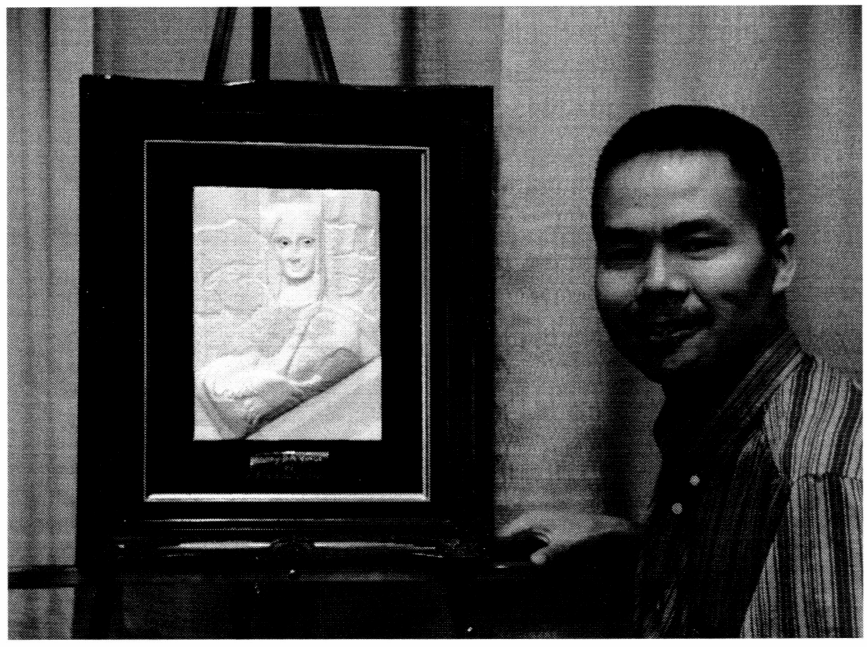


Figure 5.20: Photo, Artist Franklin Matchian standing next to his masterpiece, the Ivory Madonna, made of ivory and framed in wood, 2006 (Simon 2007)

Nevertheless, some people fear losing their Yup'ik way of life, their "*Yuuyaraq*", which means the core of being a good human being (Napoleon 1997: 5). The Yup'ik way, people believe is in danger because of the traumas they have endured in the last century- the battle over religious believes, epidemics, alcoholism, abuse and suicide. Traditional Yup'ik values, such as showing respect for the animals and land, and to contribute to the elders and community, often conflict with the western value system which the Yup'ik people are part of (Davidson 1993: 23). The memorization and

revitalization of *Yuuyaraq* through art is the Yup'ik artists' way of defining their identity and assure their path of life. Abraham explains his return to his Yup'ik origins as, "I don't want to get lost in this world" (Abraham 2006). Identifying as a Yup'ik seems to become more relevant with the increasing transnationality of our world. The question arises what it means to be Yup'ik today.

In today's multi-ethnic setting, where telecommunication, mass media and global transportation technologies blur the boundaries of cultures, the insecurity of losing ones roots or identity increases—the identification with a cultural group becomes more important. Yup'ik artists can define and secure their role and place within a multicultural world. A unique artistic style, such as specific Yup'ik design elements, makes the artists apparent and distinguishes their art from mainstream Western art. Yup'ik artists actively produce and reaffirm their ethnic position in society by producing culturally specific art (Bunten 2006: 332-333).

Yuuyaraq expressed through art, or other social or cultural activities, serves as a social regulator, as a guiding post that leads Yup'ik people through a time of incertitude and identity crises. When Atchak told me sadly, that his artisanship is soon to be extinct, he revealed not only the frustration about the loss of his culture's artistic heritage, due to the extinction of Yup'ik mask making, but also conveyed his fear that his children and future generations might lose their path through life, their Yup'ik way.

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